



## King's Research Portal

### *Document Version*

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Cohen, H. (2013). *Warner Bros. and Its First Two Great Depression Musicals: Changing the Form and Reflecting the Times*. (pp. 1-32). Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London .

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **WARNER BROS. AND ITS FIRST TWO GREAT DEPRESSION MUSICALS: CHANGING THE FORM AND REFLECTING THE TIMES**

© 2013

a working paper by Dr. Harvey G. Cohen  
Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries  
King's College London

This working paper analyses the production, content, public reaction and significance of the first two Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals (this term was created by later scholars). "42nd Street" and "Gold Diggers of 1933," both released in the first half of 1933 during some of the direst months of the Great Depression, artistically and financially rejuvenated the previously failing genre of the film musical. They both featured extravagant highly cinematic dance numbers created by Busby Berkeley, indelible original songs by Harry Warren and Al Dubin, and scenarios as well as lyrics that reflected the reality of theatre life and the economic pressures put on that world by the Great Depression like films released by the Hollywood studio system rarely did in that period. With their salty scripts full of knowing innuendo and lightly clad chorus girls, the films also challenged censorship rules of the period. The overwhelmingly positive public reaction to these films showed that audiences of the Great Depression, in the United States and elsewhere around the world, welcomed films that mirrored the struggles many were experiencing during this time of economic upheaval. The Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals demonstrated that musicals need not be divorced from the troubles of the real world; in fact, such exposure could make them more resonant.

It took a couple years, but the Great Depression finally caught up with Hollywood in 1931.<sup>1</sup> As the studios consolidated and sound films emerged, the industry grew exponentially during the 1920s. By the end of the decade, according to *Film Daily Year Book*, the American film industry boasted more employees than Ford and General Motors. The novelty surrounding "talkies" held audiences in theatres for a surprisingly long time after the 1929 stock market crash. Will Hays, President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), proclaimed that movie attendance had risen by 15 million admissions weekly in 1929 as sound pictures became ubiquitous, and 1930 marked the best year for the film industry since it began, with approximately 100 million admissions per week in a nation of 123 million. As the Hollywood studio system entered what many historians term its golden age during the 1930s and 1940s, one of the reasons behind its success was this kind of guaranteed audience and market saturation: almost everyone patronised the

---

<sup>1</sup> This section on how Hollywood endured the Great Depression is based on the following sources: Tino Balio, "A Mature Oligopoly: 1930-1948," in Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison, WI, 1976): 213-216; John Kobal, *Gotta Dance Gotta Sing: A Pictorial History of Film Musicals* (London, 1971): 24-25; Nick Roddick, *A New Deal In Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London, 1983): 19-21; Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York, 1988): 69, 86-97, 98-99, 119, 136, 159-161; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York, 1994): 161-166; [uncited author], "Warner Bros.," *Fortune* (December 1937). The Warren quote is from: Tony Thomas, *Harry Warren and the Hollywood Musical* (Secaucus, NJ: 1975): 21.

movies, and many went more than once per week. For comparison, in 2011, movie admissions dwindled to just 1.3 billion per year in a nation of about 300 million, very close to a historic low<sup>2</sup> -- each American went to the cinema on average only four times per year.

After the dramatic film industry growth of the 1920s, attendance and profits finally fell dramatically in 1931. A financially desperate period in Hollywood studio history began which didn't begin to reverse itself until 1934. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that production costs had doubled and exhibition costs soared in a relatively short time because of the introduction of sound. But the economic dislocation of the period probably remained the main reason. The studios' customer base shrank significantly – average weekly attendance dropped to 60 million in 1932. To attract audiences, ticket prices were discounted. Product giveaways and bingo games were staged at theatres to entice customers, especially at independent exhibitors' theaters showing the fourth or fifth run of a particular film in a city. From the stock market crash until 1933, one third of American movie theaters were shuttered. Revenues from foreign locations dived as well. The predictable result: the studios took a battering. As film historian Tino Balio reported:

Fox suffered a loss of \$3 million [in 1931] after a \$9 million profit the year before; and RKO's \$3 million surplus from 1930 turned into a \$5.6 million deficit. Paramount remained in the black that year, but [studio head Adolph] Zukor saw his company's profits fall from \$18 million to \$6 million and by 1932 he had a deficit of \$21 million.

By 1933, Paramount, RKO and Universal were in receivership, one step away from bankruptcy, and Fox underwent reorganisation. Of the eight biggest Hollywood studios, only MGM had stayed in the black throughout the Depression, and even increased their corporate assets during the mid-1930s, though they veered close to red territory in 1933. Overall, the stock value of these major studios went from \$960 million in 1930 (about \$12.5 billion in today's dollars) to \$140 million four years later. Paramount's stock had gone from a 1930 high of 77¼ to a 1934 low of just 1½. No one at the time knew whether Hollywood would ever recover from this devastating tailspin.

The economic boom Warner Bros. experienced in the wake of introducing sound films, and the brothers' multiple investments in ancillary businesses and movie theatres helped them survive the period without entering receivership, but they endured years of losses. The studio's annual stock market report displayed a \$7 million profit for 1930, followed by nearly \$31 million in reported losses over the next four fiscal years. The low-budget aesthetic Warners was famous for within the industry doubtless helped them survive, but they also produced fewer movies, going from a high of 88 releases in 1929 to about 55 films per year from 1931-1936. The tension was palpable during those years. Harry Warren, the Oscar-winning composer for most of the Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals, recalled arriving at the studio for the first time in the summer of 1932 to write the songs for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. The parking lot was "almost empty – they had laid off most of their people," he said

---

<sup>2</sup> Brad Tuttle, "Thumbs Down: 2011 Saw Least Movie Tickers Sold Since 1995," *Time Magazine Moneyland site* (28 December 2011). URL: <http://moneyland.time.com/2011/12/28/thumbs-down-2011-saw-least-movie-tickets-sold-since-1995/>

decades later. The studio was “in real trouble, and there was quite a bit of [initial] opposition in the company to making [an expensive musical like] *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*.” In 1937, *Fortune* magazine reported that “litigious stockholders” unsuccessfully tried to throw the Warner brothers out of their own company for allegedly poor management and failing to pay dividends between 1930-1937. “And yet Warner Bros. has been the only big theatre-owning company...excepting MGM’s parent, Loew’s Inc. – to have ridden the depression without resorting to bankruptcy, receivership, or reorganization of any kind,” concluded the magazine. “It has not even changed hands...[but] the tide has left Harry [Warner] with a nervous stomach, which keeps him at times on a light diet of steak and potatoes.”

This economic situation was paramount in guiding all studio decisions in this period, including the decision to buck the current trends of the day which viewed musicals as a moribund genre fallen out of favour with the public, and launch the series of Great Depression Musicals. In reviving and transforming the movie musical, the studio produced three musicals in 1933 that still hold up today. These musicals simultaneously took audiences on flights of fancy, while also registering the tough and dire situation inhabiting the national and international landscape. Part of the reason these films have proved so powerful and enduring, then and now, is their unique melding of struggle (during their dialogue sections) and release (during their fanciful and romantic musical numbers). Americans needed an escape from the mass misery and Warner Bros. provided it in a style unprecedented in Hollywood history. Even more importantly from the perspective of the bottom line, the 1933 Great Depression Musicals were significant in keeping the studio afloat during the worst times of the Depression in Hollywood.

The edict against musicals by head of production Darryl F. Zanuck and Harry and Jack Warner probably went into effect in 1930, a year Warner Bros. issued ten musicals, most of which evinced little effect at the box office, despite featuring songs co-written by such luminaries as Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. The next two years the studio released only seven musicals, with low budgets and little executive support behind them.<sup>3</sup>

The novelty of musicals in the wake of the birth of talking pictures had worn off by the early 1930s.<sup>4</sup> According to writer Tony Thomas, Hollywood released 50 musicals

---

<sup>3</sup> 1930 Warner Bros. musicals in order of release: *Sally*, *No No Nanette*, *Spring is Here*, *Showgirl in Hollywood*, *Mammy*, *Top Speed*, *Golden Dawn*, *Dancing Sweeties*, *Bright Lights*, *Big Boy*, *Sunny* (*Mammy* and *No No Nanette* were hits). 1931: *The Hot Heiress*, *Men of the Sky*, *Children of Dreams*, *Her Majesty Love*. 1932: *Central Park*, *Crooner*, *Big City Blues*. For more on these films, consult: Clive Hirschhorn, *The Warner Bros. Story* (London: Octopus Books, 1979): 84-123. For a list of 1929-1930 musicals from studios other than Warners, see Kobal, 36.

<sup>4</sup> This section on the 1929-1930 Hollywood musicals is based on the following sources: A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn: A Biography* (London, 1989): 198-200; Mel Gussow, *Zanuck: Don’t Say Yes Until I Finish Talking* (London, 1971): 46; Anthony W. Hodgkinson, “*42<sup>nd</sup> Street* New Deal: Some Thoughts About Early Film Musical,” *Journal of Popular Film* 4:1 (1975); Kobal, 24-46; Leo Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers* (New York, 1941): 169, 313-315.

As Rosten reports, a similar dynamic to that with Hollywood’s new musicals occurred with screenwriting in general during this period. Broadway playwrights could write skilled dialogue and

in 1929, almost one per week, while another 100 releases “dragged in a song or two” to get in on the fad. No wonder a glut ensued. As Zanuck indelicately remarked, “there were so many musicals you wanted to vomit.” The expense also proved a factor in the studios staying away from them after 1930. Costs were exacerbated during this period by studios bringing in top Broadway stars and songwriters to adorn their early musicals. For example, John McCormick, the famous Irish tenor, received \$50,000 per week (over \$650,000 in today’s money) for 10 weeks’ work, and Marilyn Miller made \$1000 an hour for 100 hours of work on *Sally*, a Warner Bros film. Color sequences, often used in musicals, represented another trend wearing thin with audiences. Film historian John Kobal reported that 60 films in 1929 contained such sequences, which featured a crude early version of color film, with a two-strip process instead of the vibrant three-color Technicolor process that arrived in the late 1930s.

While artistic and commercial successes such as Rouben Mamoulian’s *Applause* (1929) and King Vidor’s *Hallelujah* (the first African American musical -- racially progressive for the period, though less so today) were produced, most musicals from this period did not get anywhere near the standard those two films set. Two hit MGM films from 1929 demonstrate the primitive state of film sound and the low standards audiences had for the novelty of musicals at this time. *Hollywood Revue of 1929* featured an all-star cast in a variety show format surrounded by under-rehearsed chorus girls filmed mostly in proscenium style, with the camera almost always planted in the position of a member of the audience, with little editing or camera movement. Such static film construction doubtless had to do with the limited technology available during the early days of “soundies,” when the camera’s whirring noises were contained within an awkward booth that proved difficult to move around. Awkward silences are legion, corny vaudeville humor reigns, and comedy legends Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy are not used to their best effect. *Broadway Melody* somehow won the Oscar for best picture, and shares with *Revue* proscenium framing and a lack of camera movement, along with some unbelievable plot twists and a sparkling cinematic presence in actress Bessie Love.

Latter observers have argued that audiences were also alienated by the large number of operettas (such as *Bride of the Regiment*, *Dixiana*, and *The Rogue Song*, all from 1930) released, which were behind the times, to say the least. “Instead of exploiting [the musical] to convey the zesty, energetic *modernity* of America, [the industry] seemed to waste [the form] – and our time – on wallowings in outmoded, old-fashioned Europeanism of our parents’ generation,” according to scholar Anthony W. Hodgkinson. In 1930, Warner released two such films. *Golden Dawn* took African colonialism’s worst racist clichés, and adorned them with minstrel slang, blackfaced whites posing as Africans, and operetta-styled songs with titles like “My Bwana” and “Get A Jungle Bungalow.” The magnetic Marilyn Miller starred in *Sunny* as a cruise ship stowaway. The film sported an unbelievable plot, stilted dialogue and unrealistic romantic situations set to operetta music, not the modern and snappy tunes featured in the Great Depression Musicals. Sometimes with both these Warner releases, the music seems added mostly to indulge in the current fad. Neither film features more than three short songs (and in the latter’s case, three short dance

---

plots, but mostly could not deliver what was needed for successful screenwriting. Most of the initial New York playwrights hired in this period were back in Manhattan relatively quickly.

sequences) and each could have easily done its job without the musical accompaniment.

By 1931, the fad faded, Hollywood released less than 20 musicals, and those imported Broadway musical stars and songwriters had long since boarded the four-day train ride back to Manhattan. Film audiences no longer purchased tickets just to view dancing and singing on the screen; that was old hat. They needed more: a dramatic plot, well-written dialogue, star appeal, spectacle that could not be duplicated on a live theater stage. As legendary film producer Sam Goldwyn wrote Florenz Ziegfeld, Broadway's greatest musical impresario, when they worked together briefly on a film in 1930, musicals had to give "regard to screen requirements." One film that pointed the way in stretching the musical's boundaries was Rouben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight* (1932), which featured an innovative approach to sound (especially in the bravura opening sequence that unfolds in the streets of Paris) as well as placing music in unexpected cinematic settings, but still featured a plot that could have been lifted from the nineteenth-century, with unlikely mistaken identities and a romance between a princess and a tailor. The songs by Rodgers and Hart are memorable, yet rendered with operetta pretensions. Hollywood slowly learned that the old rules of Broadway did not apply to film musicals. Basically, the musical film genre had not yet been developed, its potential lay largely unexplored during this initial period. And it seems likely that American audiences needed a more uniquely American reinterpretation of the musical reflecting the spirit of the times.

Starting in 1933, against prevailing business wisdom and trends, two men at Warners, Zanuck and choreographer/director Busby Berkeley, mapped a new approach to musicals. For Zanuck, Warners had relied too much on the gangster genre in recent years and it was played out -- he viewed musicals as a potentially profitable venue for the studio to explore if produced correctly and with verve. Together, Zanuck and Berkeley created the blueprint for the successful modern film musical, before Astaire and Rogers, Bing Crosby, McDonald and Eddy, and other successful practitioners of the form later in the decade.

Zanuck boasted an impressive Hollywood resume even before joining Warners as a screenwriter in 1924, at the age of 22.<sup>5</sup> His determination surfaced early in life, when he left school to join the U.S. armed forces during World War I in 1917, lying about his age in order to serve his country. His career as a writer began in the field of pulp fiction, and a collection of his short stories, all concerned with "liquor, hop and women" according to Zanuck biographer Mel Gussow, received a positive review in the *New York Times*, and served as "progenitors of the movies that Zanuck was to make in the 20s and 30s."

---

<sup>5</sup> This capsule biography of Darryl F. Zanuck is based on the following sources: Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Bros. (1935-1951)* (New York: Viking, 1985): 12-14; Michael Freedland, *The Warner Brothers* (London: Harrap, 1983): 38, 48, 58-59; Mel Gussow, *Zanuck: Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking* (London, 1971): Chapters 1-5, 8; Leonard Mosley, *Zanuck: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's Last Tycoon* (London: Granada, 1984): 60-111; Schatz, 58-63, Ch. 9; David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.) (London, 2003): 959-960.

Sources in this footnote vary whether Zanuck was making \$4000 or \$5000 per week when he became head of production at Warner's, I'm going with Schatz's figure of \$5000, since he made a thorough investigation of the files, the figure is also duplicated in Gussow and Mosley, although it should be noted that a memo by Harry Warner quoted in the Behlmer book (pg. 12) has it at \$4000.

In the film colony of Hollywood, Zanuck first earned notoriety for his mastery at cranking out complete if corny film scripts exceedingly quickly, sometimes in a weekend. In 1925, for example, he authored 19 scripts for Warners under three pseudonyms, 12 of which made the studio money. At one point, MGM sought to hire Melville Crossman, one of his three pseudonyms. When Zanuck started in the business during the early 1920s, he got his first major break working for Universal Pictures, which was not yet a major studio. Under the leadership of founder Carl Laemmle, Universal had a reputation as a place where enterprising young people could get their first experience writing, producing and directing, provided they didn't mind being paid next to nothing while working on films with minimal budgets. Some of the best filmmakers of Hollywood's golden age learned their craft there before moving on to greener vistas, somewhat like the function played by Roger Corman's American International Pictures in the 1960s for the film makers of the so-called "Hollywood Renaissance" of the 1970s. At Universal, budding executive Irving Thalberg, who would later serve as head of production at MGM and one of Zanuck's fiercest competitors as an executive, gave Zanuck his first assignment as a screenwriter. Soon Zanuck moved on, writing gags for a year, almost always uncredited, for Mack Sennett's Keystone Films, the company known worldwide for slapstick comedy. He followed this gig by working separately with the triumvirate of legendary silent screen comedy auteurs Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, eventually becoming alienated by their refusal to apportion onscreen credit for his contributions. Zanuck's numerous scripts for Rin Tin Tin initially established his worth to the Warner brothers, who praised Zanuck as "the saviour of our operation," making him their senior producer in 1929, and head of production the next year at \$5000 per week (about \$65,000 in today's money).

Busby Berkeley proved nearly as instrumental in establishing the 1930s Warner Bros. house style as Zanuck himself.<sup>6</sup> Although Berkeley directed entire films later in his career, his main renown is as a creator and director of dance sequences in films. His work in the Great Depression Musicals made his reputation. He came from a theatrical family and as a young man performed in musical revues, gaining a reputation over time for staging musical numbers. Berkeley's first choreography experience was arranging military parades and marches, hence the emphasis on regimentation in his routines, though that was far from his only cinematic signature. By the late 1920s, he was a well-known Broadway choreographer, working on Rodgers and Hart's *A Connecticut Yankee* (1928), among five other musical comedies. As was often the case in this period, Broadway approbation led to Hollywood offers, but Berkeley initially had no interest when his agent at the William Morris Agency pressured him to accept one of the proposals: "I had seen a few film musicals and I was not impressed; they looked terribly static and restricted." Berkeley became the leading force transforming musicals into a dynamic and vital cinematic medium. When the Morris agents kept pestering Berkeley to accept Hollywood's lucrative deals, "I finally said 'All right, you get me a great star, a great producer, and a great property, and I might consider it.'" The agency assembled a package entitled

---

<sup>6</sup> This capsule biography of Busby Berkeley is based on the following sources: Freedland, 67-69; Schatz, 148-153; Thomas, 46; Tony Thomas and Jim Terry, with Busby Berkeley, *The Busby Berkeley Book* (London, 1973): 15-27; Thomson, 76; *Busby Berkeley's Kaleidoscopic Eyes* documentary, on *Dames* DVD (Warner Bros., 2006).

*Whoopee* (1930) that included Ziegfeld (one of the few times he worked on a film), Goldwyn and hot comedian/vocalist Eddie Cantor. "With a barrage like that there wasn't much I could do but agree," Berkeley recalled decades later. After the film's completion, with work on Hollywood musicals drying up, Berkeley returned to Manhattan to work with Broadway producer Billy Rose. When the film of *Whoopee*, adorned by new Berkeley routines specially designed to work with cameras, proved a hit, Goldwyn rehired Berkeley and he came to Hollywood full-time, eventually landing at Warners in 1932.

Berkeley's tableaux were lavish and beautifully organized, with a seemingly non-Warners high budget aesthetic. When his sequences arrive in the Great Depression Musicals, the sudden shifts in mood and image transport the viewer into a nearly impossible romanticised fantasy world, intoxicating and jarringly different from the quotidian trappings that characterise the rest of the screen time. In Berkeley's best work, reality is gloriously thrown out of the window. Such fantasy, however, cost a good deal of money. Great Depression Musicals composer Harry Warren recalled the resistance Berkeley received on these matters from Warner's tight-fisted top brass and how Berkeley fended them off:

About the only thing [songwriting partner Al] Dubin and I enjoyed at the preproduction meetings was watching Berkeley con the executives. He seldom had any idea what he was going to do until he got on a set, and mostly you would see him sitting there with his eyes half-closed, as if in a trance. But at the meetings he would be required to explain what he wanted and how he was going to do it. He would give them long-winded explanations in double-talk that would confuse all of them. Their final question was always the same: 'How much is it going to cost?' He was the bane of the production chiefs. They would come onto his sets and see a hundred girls sitting around doing their knitting while he thought up his ideas. They just couldn't figure him out. Neither could we much of the time. We used to call Buzz 'the Madman.'

Part of the reason Berkeley's music and dance sequences appeared so differentiated from other parts of the first two Great Depression Musicals is that they were filmed miles apart from each other. As *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* director Lloyd Bacon shot the actors in dialogue scenes on a soundstage in Burbank, the material Berkeley directed emanated from the old Warner lot on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, where Warner's Vitaphone musical shorts were produced.

Zanuck believed musicals would reap big profits for Warners -- if the form was skilfully renovated and brought up to date.<sup>7</sup> Jack and Harry Warner initially fervently

---

<sup>7</sup> This section on the making of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is based on the following sources: Patrick Brion and Rene Gilson, "A Style of Spectacle: Interview with Busby Berkeley," *Cahiers du Cinema in English* 2 (1966): 32; Mel Gussow, *Zanuck: Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking* (London, 1971): 54-58; Kobal, 112; Mosley, 185-186; Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Bros. in the 1930s* (London, 1983): 18; Bradford Ropes, *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1932), retyped by Warner Bros. studio, from the "42<sup>nd</sup> Street Book" file (1890), Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles [henceforth WBA, USC]; Schatz, 140-153; [uncited author], "Directors, Like Cooks, Can't Agree on Recipes for Films: 'Make Them Simply,' Says Frank Borzage; 'Make 'Em Hot!' Says Mervyn LeRoy," *Los Angeles Times* (3 December 1933).



opposed the idea; musicals were expensive and the public was tired of them: “Oh Christ no, we can’t give them away,” they protested. Zanuck quietly put a new Warner musical into production anyway, aided by Berkeley and Mervyn LeRoy, the studio’s premiere film director. Cameras were no longer relegated to static composition as they were during the earliest days of sound and movie musicals; LeRoy and Berkeley were kindred souls in wanting to push the genre to new limits. In a 1933 interview, LeRoy recommended that film directors “make ‘em [films] hot, with realistic hard-punching folk of a crisp, fast-moving modern world...stories with action, with typical American movement and swing.” No wonder he and Zanuck got along so well. LeRoy ended up not directing *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* because of illness, but did helm the next Great Depression Musical, *Gold Diggers of 1933*.

Zanuck saw the vehicle for a musical that could bring together the “headline” style of films he had brought to Warners, while unleashing the talents of Berkeley to full effect. In August 1932, Zanuck bought an unpublished novel by Bradford Ropes entitled *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, which shared a gritty aesthetic with many of the recent films Zanuck had commissioned. The cut-throat reality of the Broadway theatre world is presented, with more slang, drug abuse, violence and sexual activity (gay and straight, as well as adulterous) than would be allowed even in pre-Production Code Hollywood. The Broadway star’s secret lover is more obviously a gigolo in Ropes’ book, and Peggy, the somewhat corny and one-dimensional ingénue eventually played by Ruby Keeler, has much more depth than in the film as she learns first-hand how cruel and decadent the environment of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* can be. But still, much of the honesty and immediacy of the book transferred to the film, giving it a more convincing sense of verisimilitude than previous movie musicals. The film’s first shot is a hand-held slightly shaky pan of New York City from a skyscraper perspective; soon after, our first view of the rehearsal stage is another shaky hand-held shot from an audience perspective that moves down toward the stage – an exciting cinema verite feel one rarely sees in major studio films of the period. The same technique is used as the penultimate shot of the last Berkeley musical sequence near the end of the film, as the camera pans up a prop Manhattan skyscraper where Keeler and fellow star Dick Powell are perched at the top as lovers. What Zanuck provided to the first three Great Depression musicals, starting with *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, was what he had added to his earlier Warner successes: a dose of realism. Where most films of the period ignored the economic situation, the Great Depression Musicals acknowledged its presence as part of their cinematic landscape front and center, at least some of the time, especially in the three Warner musicals released during 1933. As occurred with Zanuck’s previous ventures featuring a more realistic style, this approach, as vested in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, produced an emblematic hit film that spawned many imitations, altering the trajectory of the movie musical.

*42<sup>nd</sup> Street*’s budget totalled \$400,000, large for the time, especially for the parsimonious Warner studio. To avoid resistance from Jack and Harry, Zanuck “worked on” two different scripts for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, one with musical numbers and one without. “I decided to shoot the musical numbers without Jack knowing it at the Vitagraph studio [in Hollywood] at night,” with the dialogue scenes shot at the Warner studio in Burbank. “He never knew until it was screened that it was a musical,” bragged Zanuck decades later. Such effrontery could have landed Zanuck in hot water with the brothers, but luckily, Jack and Harry “loved” the picture, as did the public.

The realism featured in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* separated it from previous musicals, but also fit well within the Hollywood studios' efforts to use increased sex and violence in films to draw more punters to the Depression-era box office. When a chorus girl sitting on a man's lap is asked "where are you sittin', dearie?," she replies: "on a flagpole." The audience is told that a "good girl" in the chorus line "makes \$45 a week and sends her mother \$100 of it." Dorothy, the established Broadway star, is perilously two-timing her show's principal investor. In a sequence set to the song "You're Getting To Be A Habit With Me," she happily swaps affection with four different men. Peggy, the ingénue who becomes a star at the end of the movie, first sees her true love in his dressing room in his "BVDs." Throughout the film, the Broadway world is viewed as an ultra-competitive, sensual, even promiscuous area – "naughty, bawdy, gaudy," as one of the lyrics claims. As film musical historian John Kobal wrote, much of the film's "appeal lay in the reincarnation of the chorus girl: once a demure non-participant [in previous films] she now became a predatory calculator, deceptively soft in garters and silk. Her crude, gutsy and very funny line of repartee made her eminently capable of coping with the wolves and sugar-daddies, swapping fast lines, outsmarting the Babbitts and generally casting a caustic look at the world around her." This spotlight on chorus girls may have had its roots in Berkeley's approach. He claimed that he directed the first close-ups of chorus girls in movie musicals in his sequences for *Whoopie*, and the trend continued throughout his career. It represented another way in which he could delineate the movie musical from the stage musical. Backstage musicals existed before *42<sup>nd</sup>*, but the Warner Great Depression Musicals presented a more unvarnished and close-up glimpse at this world.

The backstage environment of *42<sup>nd</sup>* was also characterized by hard work and long hours. Warner Baxter, hired from the Fox studio, plays Julian Marsh, the director of the show. His doctor has advised him to quit directing, but the show needs to go on for him; his back is against the wall after his savings disappeared in the stock market crash. "Did you ever hear of Wall Street?," he asks. He promises to retire when his current job is done. Though in poor financial and physical health, Marsh gives his all: "it's gonna be the toughest five weeks you ever lived through," he tells his players, warning that they'll be working day and night, but assuring them that a successful show will make their marathon efforts worthwhile for their careers. The Depression haunts the characters, just as the Depression was haunting the Hollywood community in real life. It's part of why the actors and dancers work so hard, so they won't be relegated to the street. Dorothy's secret beau puts his corsage in the refrigerator at night so he can keep it fresh and use it to look classy the next day with less expense. When the main backer of the show threatens to pull the plug after he hears of Dorothy's indiscretions, Marsh the director, in yet another impassioned exhausted speech, gets him to change his mind by reminding him of the 200 electricians, chorus girls and staff that will be thrown out of work if he follows through with his whim.

The film's approach to sensuality was reflected in Berkeley's first dance sequences for the Warner studio. As was often the case, Berkeley's elaborate productions are piled at the end of the film, with each succeeding tableau more elaborate. This sets up a template for the Great Depression musicals: for the first hour, a struggle behind the scenes ensues, the "sweat and blood and tears" it takes to put a show on is depicted,

followed by a dramatic shift in tone as Berkeley goes into action. Within his sequences, the theatre has been abandoned and the audience is transported to an environment where anything can happen, a performance space that could only exist in the movies. Berkeley gave credit to Zanuck for allowing him the “necessary freedom to revolutionise Hollywood’s concept of the movie musical,” adding that achieving this goal engendered a lot of trust: “I explained to Zanuck that I couldn’t show him exactly what he would see on the screen” before he shot it. Zanuck felt so excited by the early stages of what Berkeley came up with for *42<sup>nd</sup>* that, even before the movie became a hit, while it was still in production, he signed Berkeley to a seven-year contract with Warners.<sup>8</sup> As usual, Zanuck proved a shrewd judge of talent.

Berkeley enjoyed an unusual amount of creative freedom for any director, but especially a director at Warners. While most researched accounts of the golden age of Hollywood stress the collaborative nature of film production, Berkeley flew solo to a surprising degree. “There was no collaboration; I did everything myself,” he asserted in later decades. “From the conception to the execution, every step of the way, no matter who the director of the film, the musical numbers were entirely my own. I was alone on the stage, with my own collaborators.” Berkeley explained that he brought “sheets of paper covered with notes” to his soundstages, but “it’s what’s in my head that counts, what I see, what I imagine.” The usual studio procedure entailed using four cameras to ensure that coverage existed for the film editor to have several options for editing any scene. Berkeley did away with all cameras on his sets but one. He knew what he wanted from each shot, and filmed one shot at a time, allowing no flexibility for an editor, and not allowing the cameraman to choose the framing for a scene -- this singular system ensured that the vision onscreen represented pure Berkeley. The dance sequences in his films never existed as whole numbers, they were painstakingly perfected one shot at a time, then pieced together exactly as Berkeley designed. It was in its way as megalomaniacal a style as the way he usually restricted his dancers to stiff and limited (yet cinematically effective) poses and moves. “Producers used to ask me what I was going to do and I was indeed obliged to tell them, but they didn’t understand a word of what I said, and when they saw the result on the screen they exclaimed and said to me that they had never thought that it would be that way,” Berkeley said. Before he arrived in Hollywood, Berkeley claimed that he was “as ignorant of the ways of filmmaking as he had been in the techniques of dancing,” but his inexperience and imagination worked well for him as both enabled him to abandon common practice, crafting his own inimitable and easily recognizable style.<sup>9</sup>

Three Berkeley-designed sequences close *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. “Shuffle Off To Buffalo” follows a honeymoon couple (Keeler and an unidentified groom) as they board a train for their post-wedding trip. It’s a set that could just about be constructed on a theatre stage, but stage audiences would never be able to aggressively zoom into the sleeper cars with a camera, as Berkeley does, to produce the feeling that audiences are eavesdropping on passengers behind the curtains at bedtime. Chorines played by Ginger Rogers and Una Merkel perch on one of the sleeper bunks, eating fruit (including a banana) and casting aspersions: “Matrimony is baloney,” “She’ll be wanting alimony,” they sing. At the end of the number, in a Berkeleysque

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, Terry, Berkeley, 51-54.

<sup>9</sup> Brion and Gilson, 27-32; William Meyer, *Warner Brothers Directors: The Hard-Boiled, the Comic and the Weepers* (New Rochelle, NY, 1978): 32

combination of innocence and knowing sexuality, the camera pans in on gorgeous women in pairs in their sleeper bunks wearing silky lingerie as they play peek-a-boo with the curtains that will allow them privacy. Ultimately the black curtains close each of the couples into a private space, including the newlyweds. At the end of the scene, Keeler opens the curtains a little, leans out of the sleeper bunk, utters a tired but sprightly “ooh!,” looking weary and satisfied, and drops her bridal shoes on the floor for the porter to clean.

The next sequence, “Young and Healthy,” boasts a more elegant setting and costuming choices, introducing a Berkeley setpiece that recurred over the course of his career: dancers, particularly attractive women, filmed from above, forming geometric kaleidoscopic patterns – something a theatre audience could never see from their seats, made possible by use of the movie camera. The *Hollywood Revue of 1929* briefly featured a similar fleeting shot, but Berkeley exploits the device more fully and artistically. Cast members -- men in tuxedos and women in clinging see-through stockings and as little clothing as could be allowed -- are arrayed on enormous revolving black lazy susans. Since the floor is usually moving underneath the dancers, they don’t always have to move, sometimes all they do is run arm in arm to keep up with the speed of the wheel, hardly a complicated dancing maneuver, and this quality forms another Berkeley motif. Often, in his sequences, dancers don’t dance. Instead they establish a formation and the camera dances around them, or mechanical devices move for them. It’s a uniquely filmic and visually exciting device that separated the 1933 Warner musicals from their preceding competition. The chorus girls are often still or close to it, carried on the shiny black circular wheel as if arrayed upon an assembly line, or on high-fashion display. At such points, and in such fanciful sequences throughout his career, Berkeley is the star, more than the onscreen talent.

The “Young and Healthy” sequence finishes with the famous, some might argue infamous, tracking shot where the camera hugs the ground and follows a circular path through a tunnel of dozens of spread female legs clad in the shortest skirts possible. At the end of the shapely tunnel, Dick Powell and his date (who during this sequence only smiles, never speaks or sings and is led by men most of the time) lie close together on their stomachs, his arm wrapped tight around her supine body, grinning at the intimate scene they find themselves in. This sequence particularly illustrates how, in the words of director John Landis, Berkeley “used the frame in a three-dimensional way – in, out, around, behind.” With its sleek yet simple set design and surprising geometric patterns, it also demonstrated how, as director John Waters has observed, Berkeley routinely “made a black and white movie look better than a color movie.”<sup>10</sup> Other period musicals featured similar magnificent and imaginative sets, fanciful costuming and barely clad women like Berkeley’s films, but these earlier films viewed the proceedings mainly from a stage audience’s perspective, with proscenium-style camerawork, and static editing composition -- an atmosphere that owed too much to the theatre. Many of the early musicals, such as MGM’s *Broadway Revue of 1929*, employed a revue style of presentation featuring a variety of acts – a style of theatre show that Ziegfeld had succeeded with for decades previously, but now seemed out of date. Berkeley broke the camera free and allowed it to travel anywhere, and that spirit of freedom contributed to the sentimental and romantic aura of dreams

---

<sup>10</sup> John Landis and John Waters interviews from *Busby Berkeley: A Study in Style*, documentary featured on the *Gold Diggers of 1935* DVD (Warner Bros., 2006).

that the Great Depression Musicals often trafficked in. “I work, I create, solely for the camera,” Berkeley proclaimed in the mid-1960s.<sup>11</sup>

For the concluding “42<sup>nd</sup> Street” production number, Berkeley constructed an idealised cleaned-up New York City set far from reality. The elaborate tableau went on for blocks, featured cruising taxi cabs and police on horses, numerous storefronts and buildings, as well as a gigantic elevated Manhattan subway track impossible to render on the live stage. It is made obvious, as so often happens in the Berkeley oeuvre, that the theatre where this scene began has now been abandoned. The audience has been transported to a dimension where anything is possible. Part of what makes this scene work so effectively is Berkeley’s decision to start the sequence with Ruby Keeler singing and dancing in front of an ordinary painted background of a Manhattan scene, as one would typically see at a theatre show, before the sequence mushrooms into almost absurd proportions. Yet, in the midst of the fantasy on display, reality intrudes, and the mix of the incongruous themes and visions is what makes this production number work even eighty years later. Keeler’s character praises 42<sup>nd</sup> Street as a place “where the underworld can meet the elite,” where one can find “sexy ladies from the 80s who are indiscreet.” In one scene, a woman escapes from a man abusing her by leaping off a first floor window into another man’s arms. After they dance for a few seconds, her tormentor returns to stab her in the back. Dick Powell, dressed like a dandy, watches this scene from the first floor of the same building with a drink in his hand, nonplussed, as if this kind of drama happened everyday.

Berkeley’s signature style, while thrilling to cinema audiences, usually didn’t attract the best vocal and dance talents like an Astaire or a Garland. Why should such gifted specialists appear in a Berkeley film, and get paid superstar rates when the staging represented the paramount concern and attraction? James Cagney starred in *Footlight Parade* a few months after the release of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, but no one knew what a dynamic musical performer he turned out to be in that film after previously being known only for tough guy roles; he never appeared in a Berkeley film again. Berkeley’s style evinced an easy appeal to a studio administration wanting to economize on talent costs (with the costs incurred by Berkeley’s extravagant sets, they probably needed to economize elsewhere). Even in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, top-billed stars like Warner Baxter and Bebe Daniels exist, but it is probably no accident that the actors who received the most attention and gained the most lift in their careers from the film were Ruby Keeler (playing her first film role) and her romantic interest Dick Powell (who only began his Warner Bros. career the previous year). They went on to star in many other Warner musicals during the 1930s, often paired together; Baxter and Daniels never did a Warner musical again. Keeler appears ungainly at times in her tap solo during the concluding “42<sup>nd</sup> Street” production number, and another dancer seems to be standing in for her during the close-up shot. She also tends to do the same steps repeatedly in the Warner Great Depression Musicals. Her singing voice, like Powell’s, is not especially memorable. Both of their voices grate at times.<sup>12</sup> Actors with less talent could flourish in Berkeley musicals since the imaginative

---

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Brion and Rene Gilson, “A Style of Spectacle: Interview with Busby Berkeley,” *Cahiers du Cinema in English* 2 (1966): 28.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas hints in his book about Harry Warren that Keeler mainly received the *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* assignment over others because of her status as the wife of Warner star Al Jolson: 21.

choreography functioned as the star of the show. But this Berkeley aesthetic also served the premise of the film: Keeler's character Ruby is not burned out or cynical like most of the Broadway guys and dolls we meet in the film, she's fresh and enthusiastic, her eyes sparkle, even in monochrome black and white. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* is a film in which the veterans make way for the young, where anyone with the right spirit and attitude can become a star, aided by a little luck. As the character Dorothy in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* observes, "most anyone can have success with the proper breaks." That theme, combined with the Zanuckian dose of realism and Berkeley's lavish appointments established the fantasy that, to this day, in all its revivals over the decades, makes *42nd Street* such an enduring American musical.

The songwriting of Al Dubin and Harry Warren also helped explain the success of the Warner Bros. Great Depression musicals.<sup>13</sup> The duo were brought together by Zanuck to fashion songs for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, and ended up composing 43 musicals for Warner Bros. in five years. Despite winning three Oscars for songwriting, enjoying more songs (42) on the *Your Hit Parade* radio program than Irving Berlin (33) from 1935-1950, being consistently employed by the major Hollywood studios for more than a quarter century (a claim no other songwriter can make), and having 50 million pieces of his sheet music issued, composer Warren is rarely known or discussed other than by aficionados. Lyricist Dubin shares a similar undeserved anonymity. This might be because, unlike composers such as the Gershwins and Berlin, Dubin and Warren never enjoyed large success on Broadway creating their own shows, and writing songs for film was viewed by many at the time as a lesser skill (although both did work on Broadway and wrote hit songs separately before uniting in Hollywood). They also eschewed publicity about themselves, while Berlin and the Gershwins served as regular gossip column fodder. Hit lyricist Mack Gordon recalled that Warren once hired a public relations person, but fired him when stories about him began appearing: "He said it was embarrassing to see stories about himself. And he let the guy go." But Dubin and Warren didn't mind briefly appearing in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, Warren had a Warners film short dedicated to his music that he appeared in, and one of the funniest moments in *Gold Diggers of 1933* for those in the know occurs when a Broadway producer, impressed with the songs written by the character played by Dick Powell, announces "I'll cancel my contract with Warren and Dubin, they're out." Of course, the songs in question were actually Warren and Dubin compositions.

For Dubin and Warren, personal publicity did not denote a priority. They were earning four-figure paychecks in addition to publishing royalties at Warners during a period of general economic calamity, and more importantly, their songs spoke for them. Their best compositions were not only extremely catchy, but featured the same kind of witty dialogue and crackling urban slang that accounted for the most effective

---

<sup>13</sup> This section on Al Dubin and Harry Warren is based on the following sources: Jack Burton, *The Blue Book of Hollywood Musicals* (Watkins Glen, NY, 1953): 43-51; Roy Hemming, *The Melody Lingers On: The Great Songwriters and Their Movie Musicals* (New York, 1986): Chapter 9; Anthony W. Hodgkinson, "42<sup>nd</sup> Street New Deal: Some Thoughts About Early Film Musicals," *Journal of Popular Film* 4:1 (1975): 34-36; Patricia Dubin McGuire, *Lullaby of Broadway: Life and Times of Al Dubin* (Secaucus, NJ, 1983): 10-17, 59-63, 94-112; Thomas, 1-53; *Footlight Parade: Music For The Decades* short documentary available on the *Footlight Parade* DVD (Warner Bros., 2006).

non-musical moments in the Great Depression Musicals. They perfectly complimented the flavour of the productions, with a similar melding of optimism and grit. Warren biographer Tony Thomas argued that although Berkeley deserved and received a lot of the credit and accolades for the sequences he designed and directed in the Warner musicals, “it must be remembered that the songs came first and that in almost every instance the idea for the production began with Al Dubin.”

And a large number of the Dubin and Warren songs have remained evergreen. In the initial rush to make musicals in 1929-1930, Hollywood brought west some of the most famous Broadway songwriters. But after the bottom fell out of the initial market for musicals, most of those easterners returned to New York. When Zanuck and Warners revived the musical genre in 1933, the songs mostly came from writers the studios cultivated like Dubin and Warren who did not have previous massive success on Broadway, a group of composers whose talents were uniquely suited towards films. Composing for films connoted a different kind of assignment than composing a Broadway musical. A full score was rarely needed, and only half a dozen songs or less were required, but such songs not only had to forward the plot and theme of the film, but also needed to work in a uniquely cinematic fashion. Warren and Dubin’s output during the mid-1930s frequently lit up Busby Berkeley’s imagination, and that lit up the box office and eventually the top 40 radio airwaves, sheet music and record sales, all of which Warners held a stake in. Jack Burton, in his short compendium of Hollywood musical songwriters, argues that “this renaissance [in film composing] marked the opening of a prolonged battle royal between four new teams of songwriters who punched their way to the top of the 1933 Hit Parade”: Sam Coslow/Arthur Johnston, Leo Robin/Ralph Rainger, Mack Gordon/Harry Revel, and Dubin/Warren. But the songs of the first three teams mentioned, although frequently well-crafted, have not survived and thrived during ensuing decades as much as the songs Dubin and Warren wrote for Warner Bros.: “42<sup>nd</sup> Street,” “I Only Have Eyes For You,” “You’re Getting to Be A Habit With Me,” “We’re in the Money,” “Lullaby of Broadway,” “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” and more. Another reason for the lasting popularity of their songs was Dubin’s disciplining of himself early in his career to aim his lyrics towards the market of young girls 15 to 25, who he believed bought the majority of sheet music, the dominant money maker in the music industry until at least the mid-1930s. That demographic represents an even more common target for songwriters and producers in today’s music business.

Low respect for songwriters among the public and film executives also contributed to Warren and Dubin’s lack of fame. Jack Warner, infamous for his mania to cut studio costs, once asked Warren how long it took him to write a song. “Three weeks,” replied Warren. Jack expressed scepticism. “Three weeks to write a *good* song,” Warren clarified. The craft of songwriting, especially in popular music, went mostly unrecognized at this time. As Warren recounted to Tony Thomas in the 1970s:

It’s a mystery to me that almost all the movie producers with whom I’ve worked have been musically ignorant people, even those who were making musicals, and they never seemed willing to give us the respect they would give to actors or technicians. I remember playing a waltz for one of the top producers at Warners. It was short and took only about a minute and a half to play. All he could say was, ‘It couldn’t have taken you very long to write that.’

Warren makes a valid point here, but it should also be pointed out that Warren's greatest visual interpreter, Busby Berkeley, who helped sear Warren's compositions into the public's consciousness, freely admitted that he didn't know "one note of music from another."<sup>14</sup> Warren also made an exception for Zanuck, who contrary to other producers he worked with over his career "was interested in every phase of production, which is what made him a first-class producer...Perhaps it was because he had been a writer, but he was interested in what [Dubin and I] were doing."

The new multi-format marketing Warner Bros. devised to promote the Great Depression Musicals also contributed to their success with the public. The P.R. campaign for *42<sup>nd</sup>* dwarfed campaigns for their previous musicals, according to the Warner Bros. files. The *Motion Picture Herald* maintained that Warners also took the marketing of *42<sup>nd</sup>* to new heights within the industry. "All too rarely do we find the opportunity of waxing enthusiastic over a press sheet, but here is one that leaves little or nothing to the imagination," enthused a regular columnist known as "Chick." "Page after page is crammed full of carefully thought-out ideas to bring business to the box office." The team at Warners realized that their new approach to musicals needed a similarly new approach in terms of marketing, and delivered. One full-page ad for the film, which opened four days after Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumed the presidency, proclaims it is "inaugurating a NEW DEAL in ENTERTAINMENT!" A section of the ad not seen in magazines but presumably seen by exhibitors and journalists, lists the national publications the ad will appear in, bragging it will reach nearly 12 million Americans. "Get your share of business from this advertising," the copy advises.<sup>15</sup> With each of the next two Great Depression Musicals premiering in 1933, ever more involved and detailed publicity campaigns and pressbooks would be mounted. Because *42<sup>nd</sup>* finished filming in 1932, and did not premiere until March 1933 (a longer post-production period than usual for the time), it's possible that Warner Bros. purposely delayed its release to take advantage of the massive publicity generated by the cross-country train filled with movie stars commissioned by the studio to arrive in Washington, D.C. for Roosevelt's inauguration. Or perhaps, realising they had a potential smash hit on their hands that renovated the movie musical genre, they took their time fashioning a more detailed and sizeable public relations package than usual to promote the film. Or both.

Also, with the marketing of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, strategies for promoting musicals at Warners changed in ways that broadened and strengthened their box office appeal.<sup>16</sup> Previous musicals such as *Crooner* (1932) featured a harder edged "scorching" appeal in their ads, especially in matters of sex, promising to reveal "the naked truth" about "radio crooners" and let viewers meet "the bimbo who put sex appeal in a microphone." "They met at nine, they danced at ten, they kissed at eleven and were married at

---

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, 29.

<sup>15</sup> "Chick," "Selling '42<sup>nd</sup> Street,'" *Motion Picture Herald* (11 March 1933); *42nd Street* advertisement, file 679 (1933), WBA/USC.

<sup>16</sup> *Crooner* Pressbook, *Crooner* publicity file 679A (1932); *Dancing Sweeties* Pressbook, *Dancing Sweeties* publicity file (un-numbered). WBA/USC.



twelve,” bragged the marketing copy for *Dancing Sweeties* (1930). “The boys and girls of today whose new code of freedom is approved by no one but themselves!...a comedy drama of young sinners and their gay goings-on.” The materials promoting *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* still featured chorus girls in skimpy costumes, but the sexuality of the characters onscreen and in the ads is more implied than explicitly spelled out. A more wholesome family appeal applied to *42<sup>nd</sup>* with its focus on the young and somewhat naïve couple portrayed by Keeler and Powell. Additionally, the chorus girls are viewed more as hard-working than as sex bombs. Perhaps this drive towards enhanced propriety was also reflected in the higher quality look of the publicity materials produced for *42<sup>nd</sup>*, which were printed on more high-quality glossy paper while previous musicals’ publicity materials appeared on newsprint. Combined with the expensive celebrity-adorned cross-country train ride, the campaign gave *42<sup>nd</sup>* the aura of a classy show business event rather than a controversial and prurient expose.

The racier elements from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* attracted attention from the censors of the time, but they had not yet acquired the power to order wholesale cuts or changes.<sup>17</sup> The drive toward installing some kind of national moral control over the film industry had been building for over a decade. Inspired by scandals involving stars and directors during the early 1920s (as well as the competition represented by the nascent radio industry), the major studios initiated a trade organization called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) to collectively deal with these potentially damaging issues, and deliver a unified and respectful image of their industry. The moguls now were represented by one voice promoting, lobbying and defending the film industry, and that voice belonged to former U.S. Postmaster General Will Hays. Over the next quarter century as president of the MPPDA, Hays unleashed numerous articles and speeches aggressively vouchsafing the artistic and moral integrity of Hollywood product. His imprimatur and stern presence so shaped the image of his bosses and their companies that the MPPDA was commonly known in the movie colony as the Hays Office.

But the center only held for a few years. By the end of the decade, religious groups, particularly the Catholic Church, inveighed against how Hollywood’s films promulgated what the Church viewed as the immorality of the 1920s. Sociologists provided (now mostly discredited) data demonstrating how American youth were being corrupted by cinematic exposure. Talk of boycotts by millions of religious Americans simmered in the media, an unsettling thought for the studios at the dawn of

---

<sup>17</sup> Sources for this section on the development of the Production Code Administration: Balio, 220-222; A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn* (London, 1989): 106-107; Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934* (New York, 1999): Chapter 1, 125; Scott Eyman, *Empire of Dreams: The Epic Life of Cecil B. DeMille* (New York, 2010): 294-297; Father Daniel Lord and Martin Quigley, “The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930,” included as an appendix in Doherty, 347-367; Sklar, 82-85, 173-174; A. E. Hancock in “What The Picture Did For Me” [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (30 September 1933).

Examples of the sociological research done on motion pictures in this period: Henry James Forman, *Our Movie-Made Children* (New York, 1933); [uncited authors], “The Researchers – And Reactions: Film Disquieting to the Children, Researchers Hold” and “Save the screen from degeneracy, is Hearst’s plea,” *Motion Picture Herald* (10 June 1933); “Scientists Answer Forman’s Charges,” *Motion Picture Herald* (7 October 1933).

the Depression. To placate the concerns, Hays and the MPPDA commissioned a Production Code, written in 1930 by two prominent Catholics, Father Daniel Lord and Martin Quigley, editor of the conservative *Motion Picture Herald*. The eventual document produced, “deeply Catholic in tone and outlook,” hoped to serve an honorable purpose, according to film historian Thomas Doherty:

The Code was a sophisticated piece of work. Contrary to popular belief, the document was not a grunted jeremiad from bluenose fussbudgets, but a polished treatise reflecting long and deep thoughts in aesthetics, education, communications theory, and moral philosophy. In the context of its day, the Code expressed a progressive and reformist impulse...It evinced concern for the proper nurturing of the young and the protection of women, demanded due respect for indigenous ethnics and foreign peoples, and sought to uplift the lower orders and convert the criminal mentality. If the intention was social control, the allegiance was on the side of the angels.

They produced 20 pages of guidelines. The Code’s authors mandated, among other things, that in Hollywood films all crimes should be punished by prison or death, that evil could not be “presented alluringly,” that “vulgarity” and “obscenity” be banished as well as the “Kooch” and “Can-Can” dances, that religion be respected, and that romantic relationships should only exist between two people of the opposite sex and needed to stress the institutions of marriage and home and avoid depictions of “arousal.” This litany satisfied Hollywood’s critics, but not for long since the Code arrived with no enforcement mechanism. The studios claimed they would honor the Code, and thanked the authors and the pressure groups publicly for their guidance, but no penalties were established for violating the code, which was supervised by a mostly powerless organization called the Studio Relations Committee (SRC). Officials from the SRC read movie scripts ahead of time, made suggestions for cuts, but the studios were under no pressure to make the cuts and often ignored the advice or reversed committee decisions. In 1934, a renewal of moral disgust by many of the same religious groups led to a stricter Production Code regime led by a strengthened Production Code Administration (replacing the SRC), which not only imposed severe financial penalties for studios that flaunted Code violations, but could actually stop the release of a film if it did not measure up to Code standards. In 1933, however, this innovation lay in the future. The 1930-1934 period is now known among film scholars and the general public as the pre-code era, a time when the Hollywood studios generally ignored the 1930 Code, increasing the portions of sex and violence in their films in order to attract dwindling audiences. The Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals, like many films of this period, would be able to feature amounts of sex, violence and salty language that post-1934 Hollywood product would not be able to duplicate for a quarter-century or more.

In letters to Darryl Zanuck during the last months of 1932, SRC officials suggested cuts to *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, including a scene where a character claimed that a character known as “Anytime Annie” “only said no once and then she didn’t hear the question.”<sup>18</sup> Most of the suggested cuts were ignored, illustrating Zanuck’s

---

<sup>18</sup> Sources for this paragraph: Jason Joy/Production Code Administration to Darryl Zanuck, 28 September 1932; Wingate/PCA to Darryl Zanuck, 27 December 1932; Joseph Breen/PCA to Jack Warner, 26 August 1936; PCA Files for *42nd Street*, microfilm, Margaret Herrick Library, Department of Special Collections, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

determination to strike a realistic tone in Warner films. Since the early 1920s, dozens of individual American states maintained censor boards that ruled on every exhibited Hollywood film; each state could mandate different cuts, a time-consuming and costly process that was one of the reasons studios accepted the more powerful Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 – they only wanted to have to cut their films once for family consumption. When it came to *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, for example, the state of Pennsylvania insisted on the most cuts, including the flagpole line and Keeler's "ooh!" when she drops her bridal shoes. Massachusetts wanted Warner to "eliminate scenes showing girls in extreme décolleté," which would have been a difficult if not impossible job necessitating the elimination of many minutes from the finished product. They also objected to "the bridge of legs" in the "Young and Healthy" number. As the studios well knew, not all audiences wanted their films shorn of spicy content. In the *Motion Picture Herald*, a theatre owner in Columbia City, IN noted the audience reaction to "Shuffle Off To Buffalo," a "ribald song" from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*: "It went over [with my patrons] and regardless of the demand for no more spice in pictures, they [the censors] had better consult the average audience and see if they don't want some of it."

But censors of the period were probably less worried about the Great Depression Musicals than other films resorting to more realistic and tarted up visions of romance to garner larger audiences.<sup>19</sup> The same week in June 1933 that *Gold Diggers of 1933* premiered in Los Angeles, a large font ad for MGM's *Today We Live* asked: "CAN ANY WOMAN BE FAITHFUL – in the heart of one man and in the arms of another?...her conscience in combat with her yearnings...she dare not stop to think! A flaming symbol of rebellious womanhood...grasping at ecstasy of the moment." Paramount's main feature that week, *The Story of Temple Drake*, based on a "flaming novel" by William Faulkner, attracted paying customers by warning them to "please do not bring your children to see this picture." "As long as there are girls like Temple Drake you ought to know about them!," the copy leered. "S-h-h-h! They have whispered about girls like this for generations...now for the first time somebody has the courage to frankly tell you about them! [She] was a dramatic victim of her own desire!" Both women in these ads, Joan Crawford and Miriam Hopkins respectively, boast come-hither looks. Compared to such advertisements that flaunted prurient alternatives to Production Code morality, the images of Berkeley's fantasy-laden sets adorned with smiling showgirls for the Warner Bros. musicals, even if they sported little clothing, seem almost innocent. They certainly do not depict tableaux that could be duplicated in one's real life, and a celebration of traditional romance and marriage (in that period anyway) was guaranteed at the end of a movie musical. The line stressed the most in the *Gold Diggers* ad is: "The screen awakens to a new conception of spectacle and beauty!" Such a difference in emphasis very well could have represented another reason why Warner Bros. tended to ignore SRC comments about their musicals -- they knew they weren't the main or worse offenders. When the public started clamouring for more censorship, they rarely if ever cited the Great Depression Musicals.

In a letter from 1936, when the Production Code was in full force, three years after *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'s original release, PCA chief Joseph Breen made it clear to Jack Warner

---

<sup>19</sup> Ads for *Today We Live*, *The Story of Temple Drake* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Los Angeles Times* (1 June 1933): 9.

that the film required numerous cuts for a legal re-release. It would not pass muster in the new, more restrictive climate. The studio had no choice but to comply if they wanted to reissue the film. Luckily, in this period when the major studios were usually unconcerned about film preservation, Warner Bros. kept the original print from 1933 as well as the re-edited 1936 release, so the prints and DVDs in circulation today are the uncensored version. Similar situations, in 1933 and 1936, occurred for the films *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *Footlight Parade*.

Initial reactions to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street showed that Zanuck's goal of renovating the movie musical struck a chord with both critics and audiences.<sup>20</sup> Edwin Schallert, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter who covered the financial end of the motion picture business as well as reviewing its products, noted that the film was "different from some of those that came and went—and whose passing was distinctly not regretted a few years ago—it has more of real material and purpose than its predecessors." He praised its emphasis on "the business of show-making" and rated it overall "the best musical film since the early days of the talkies," words close to those used by Mordaunt Hall at the *New York Times*: "the liveliest and one of the most tuneful musical comedies that has come out of Hollywood."

Financially, 42<sup>nd</sup> Street exceeded Warner Bros.' expectations, despite the national bank holiday that occurred during its premiere week.<sup>21</sup> Aided by the widespread promotion afforded by the "42<sup>nd</sup> Street Special" train, it did 50% more business in its first week than *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang*, the studio's biggest hit of 1932, in Philadelphia and Memphis, and doubled *Fugitive*'s opening week grosses in Denver, St Louis and San Antonio. Special 9:00AM and midnight shows were scheduled at Warner's flagship Strand theatre in New York City to handle the overflow. Nationwide, it was held over for a second week in 95% of its initial engagements, a rare feat, particularly during the Depression, and it ran for nine weeks in New York City (with 450,000 paid admissions) and five weeks in Los Angeles when the great majority of films from the period ran for a week or less. According to the *Motion Picture Herald*'s "Asides" column, no other film possessed the box office longevity of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. It ended up being the top grossing film in America during March 1933, and the third-highest grossing film in April. Theatre owners throughout the country praised the film over the next few months in the *Motion Picture Herald*'s

---

<sup>20</sup> Mordaunt Hall, "Putting on a Show," *New York Times* (10 March 1933); Edwin Schallert, "'Forty-Second Street' Lively, Tuneful Film," *Los Angeles Times* (18 March 1933).

<sup>21</sup> [uncited author], "Special Train Carries '42d Street' To Record," *Motion Picture Herald* (18 March 1933); Warner Bros. advertisement, "These Days Other Companies...", *Motion Picture Herald* (8 April 1933); "The Box Office Champions For March" and "What The Picture Did For Me" [columns], *Motion Picture Herald* (22 April 1933); "Theatre Receipts," "What The Picture Did For Me" and "Asides and Interludes" [columns], *Motion Picture Herald* (29 April 1933); "What The Picture Did For Me" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (13 and 20 May, 17 June 1933); "The Box Office Champions For March" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (20 May 1933); [uncited author], "84 Features With Music Available For Booking In The Next Few Months," *Motion Picture Herald* (20 May 1933).

While the great majority of theatre owners praised the appeal of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in the pages of *Motion Picture Herald*, not all did. A theatre owner in Geneseo, IL complained that 42<sup>nd</sup> featured "No outstanding stars, no beautiful sets, no singing of any account and dancing numbers far short of wonderful": "What The Picture Did For Me" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (13 May 1933).

“What The Picture Did For Me” column: “If we could only have a few more like this we would have no worry about banks” (Nashville, IL); “Did the best third night’s business my house has ever done, so I can give it no higher praise” (Pierre, SD); “Business beyond compare! Thanks a thousand times, Warner Bros.” (Morris, IL); “the greatest box office attraction I have had in two years” (Montpelier, ID). The latter theatre owner spotted many of his patrons coming to the show two nights in a row.

The next Warner Bros. Great Depression Musical had been on the boards since at least the previous autumn, when it was known as *High Life*. Sometime around the turn of the year its title changed to *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Much of the material concerning showgirls and their encounters with high-class men emanated from a 1919 play entitled *The Gold Diggers*. According to film writer Martin Rubin, Warners originally bought the material intending to develop it as a drama, but the success of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* inspired them to change its emphasis. This production history could explain why there appears to be such a noticeable difference of quality between the musical and dialogue portions of the film. Variety called it “the first of the ‘second editions’ of film musicals,” what we would today call a sequel, since Warners had previously released a much less successful film entitled *Gold Diggers* in 1929. It also served as a sequel, with its similar aesthetic and stars, to *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*.

As the *Gold Diggers* script underwent development, and Franklin Roosevelt won and assumed office, more and more themes from the Great Depression were incorporated into the script. The opening and closing numbers of the film, which openly reference the Great Depression in lyrics and images more explicitly than was the case in *42<sup>nd</sup>*, were the last sequences to be created and filmed. As late as February 1933, two months before filming ceased on *Gold Diggers*, the “We’re in the Money” and “Forgotten Man” sequences were not present in the script, although the former number is hinted at in Zanuck’s copy of the revised temporary script from January with stage directions that do not exactly coalesce with the scene as eventually filmed: “Dancing madly...no depression – forget the blues – throw your money away’ – as they throw handfuls of gold coins wildly into air.”<sup>22</sup> The “We’re in the Money” number would be optimistic, but not wildly optimistic. How could it be? As the two Depression-themed musical bookends of the film were being mapped out and brought before the cameras, the nation and the new Roosevelt administration were facing some of the darkest days in American economic history.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Gold Diggers of 1933* Story Outline file (1920) (25 November 1932); *Gold Diggers of 1933* Revised Temporary Script file (1920) (18 January 1933); *Gold Diggers of 1933* Story – Coverage file (1920) (7 February 1933); *Gold Diggers of 1933* Story – Revised Final Script file (1920) (8 February 1933); *Gold Diggers of 1933* Cutter’s Scripts file (1920) (11 February 1933). WBA/USC. [uncited author], *Gold Diggers of 1933* review article, c. May 1933, *Variety Film Reviews* database. In the latter Warner script, “Money” was in the script, but as the closer for the film, not as the opening number. In the 8 February script, “Money” opens and closes the film. There are no scripts in this file that reference the “Forgotten Man” number – as will be noted later in the chapter, this sequence seems to have been written and produced at the absolute last minute in the production.

Information about the 1919 “Gold Diggers” play is from: Martin Rubin in *Gold Diggers of 1933: FDR’s New Deal Broadway Bound*, short documentary feature included on *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Warner Bros. DVD, 2006).

According to a Warner Bros. press release as well as the film's work schedule, *Gold Diggers* had to be rush-produced and rush-released because "fifteen musical films went in production on the West Coast as a direct result of the fact that '42<sup>nd</sup> Street' has broken box office records wherever it has been shown." Actually, that figure represented a severe underestimation; *Motion Picture Herald* reported in May 1933 that 68 musicals from American studios were due in the next year, all hoping for a piece of the boffo 42<sup>nd</sup> business as well as a 1933 Goldwyn musical starring Eddie Cantor and featuring dance routines designed by Berkeley. In the same Warners press release, Albert Warner, the company's treasurer and head of distribution, complained that "it is a most unfortunate state of affairs when a company which anticipates the trend of public taste accurately, as we have done in the present case of musical motion pictures, is immediately penalized by the production of a flood of imitations." Then as well as now, copycat productions of established hit films were no novelty in Hollywood, as he must have known. Among the 1933 offenders Albert probably had in mind were Walter Winchell's *Broadway Through A Keyhole* (released by 20<sup>th</sup>-Century), featuring chorus girls dressed remarkably like Berkeley's, and Universal's *Moonlight and Pretzels*, which included "Dusty Shoes," a Great Depression-themed closing sequence with a remarkable resemblance to the first and last scenes in *Gold Diggers*, but adorned with less budget, imagination, and an annoying operetta-like melody a decade or two out of pop music fashion. As is often the case with quickly produced copies of successful culture formulas, there wasn't much in such films for geniuses like Berkeley to worry about. Albert Warner went further and claimed that the studio would produce "no more musical feature-length pictures, at least during the present season and until the imitative season dies down." Perhaps he was just trying to lead other studios off the scent with this last statement, as he must have known that, more than a month before *Gold Diggers* premiered in early June, his brother Jack had already bought the rights to the next Great Depression Musical, *Footlight Parade*, and a script was well under way.<sup>23</sup>

In a departure from the others in the initial trio of Great Depression Musicals, *Gold Diggers of 1933* starts with a bang, an elaborate Berkeley sequence with no plot explanation beforehand. It proved much more fitting to the theme of the film than the original "dancing madly, singing happy" directions in the January 1933 version of the script. After a credits sequence that features the cast superimposed on coins, Ginger Rogers in a close-up, adorned in shiny coins and not much else, proclaims in song: "I've got good news to shout in your ears, the long lost dollar has come back to the fold... Old Man Depression you are through, you done us wrong!" While portrayed in close-up, she's allowed for a few seconds to tell the story without the elaborate sets of

---

<sup>23</sup> *Gold Diggers of 1933* Publicity – Pressbook – "Advertising Section," file 681 [probably May or June 1933]; Jack L. Warner to Jerome Kingston, 25 April 1933, from *Footlight Parade* Story File 2872; James Wingate / Production Code Administration to Jack L. Warner, 8 June 1933. WBA/USC. The latter letter shows that the PCA was already worried about the *Footlight* script by 8 June 1933, one day after the *Gold Diggers* premiere in New York City, five months before the *Footlight* premiere.

[uncited authors], "84 Features," *ibid*, and "Pictures To Be Released With Music," *Motion Picture Herald* (20 May 1933).

Albert Warner's moaning represented a typical Warner complaint. The year before, Jack Warner publicly berated other studios for copying their successful *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang*: [uncited author], "Jack Warner Burns At Cycles," *Variety* (4 October 1932).

the usual Berkeley musical enterprise. She announces at the outset and makes it obvious that this will be a movie about the Great Depression. As the camera eventually pulls back, we see the usual bevy of Berkeley beauties dressed similarly holding huge coins in each hand with another huge coin not adequately covering their hips. They're prancing (as usual for Berkeley's charges, not dancing) on a cavernous set adorned by coins close to forty feet high. Out of a huge onstage building with a 20-foot-high dollar sign on it, more chorus girls wearing even less emerge with their change-jingling outfits closely examined by a medium shot.

The spell of flashy and fleshy reverie is broken when about a dozen men from the Sheriff's office rudely interrupt the number and insist on repossessing the costumes, sets, even the sheet music. "We got a great show, it opens tomorrow night," protests the show's producer Barney Hopkins, played by Warner regular Ned Sparks. "You can't do this to me just because I don't pay a few bills -- when the show opens, I will pay them." The cop in charge replies: "Tell it to the sheriff." The showgirls are inured to this situation: "this is the 4<sup>th</sup> show in 2 months that I've been in of and out of"; "they close before they open"; and Ginger Rogers, who began the sequence, finishes the scene with a note of disgust: "the Depression, dearie." Film historian Richard Dyer has observed that this scene with its "piles of women" particularly demonstrates the Berkeleyian view of "women as sexual coinage, women—and men—as expressions of the male producer."<sup>24</sup> And when the show closes before it opens because of the producer's financial troubles, the paychecks of those women, as well as those of the dozens of staff, vanish.

The film then concentrates on the personal lives of the chorus girls during the Great Depression. They sleep late because they have no food and no work. As one of them steals a bottle of milk from a nearby apartment ledge, they reminisce about the days when they lived in luxury, enjoyed spending money and nice things, and had gentlemen taking care of them. Hopkins comes to visit them, and shares an idea for a "new, different" show that he thinks is sure-fire. "What's the show about?" asks one of the girls. "It's all about the Depression," he replies. Joan Blondell, the feisty star of both *Gold Diggers* and *Footlight Parade* as well as many other 1930s films, replies with a serious tone in her voice: "we won't have to rehearse that." When the girls' neighbour, an unproven songwriter played by Dick Powell, auditions one of his numbers for Hopkins, the song continues the Depression motif. "I couldn't sing a gay song, it wouldn't be sincere," goes the Al Dubin lyric. "I could never croon a happy tune without a tear." After hearing Powell's idea for a song about the "forgotten man" in the Great Depression, Hopkins reveals his vision for the new show:

"That's it! That's what this show's about. The Depression, men marching, marching in the rain. Doughnuts and cruellers, men marching, jobs, jobs...A blue song. Not, not a blue song, but a wailing....the big parade of tears. That's it.[...]"

"Isn't there going to be any comedy in this show?" [asks one of the chorus girls]

---

<sup>24</sup> Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical: A Reader* (London, 1981): 186.

“Plenty. The gay side, the hard boiled side, the cynical and funny side of the Depression. I’ll make them laugh at you starving to death, honey. Be the funniest thing you ever did.”

But from this scene on, except for a scene where Powell is convinced to take the place of an ailing singer onstage because otherwise the show will close and the “kids” in the show will “have to do things [you] wouldn’t want on your conscience,” the film and music loses much of its poignance and connection to the Great Depression theme. Until the end of the film, the Great Depression is hardly mentioned, perhaps because the film makers felt that relentless identification with it could be off-putting to audiences, but more likely, because they grafted the Depression themes at the last minute onto a musical they had been developing for months. It’s almost as if the musical splits into two irreconcilable parts, always a danger when the Berkeley sequences in the Warner Bros. musicals were already markedly different from the dialogue sections.

The first number in Hopkins’ musical, as shown onscreen, is “Pettin’ In The Park.” It’s a wide-ranging Berkeley sequence full of both lyrical and filmed double entendres of various couples engaging in the practice, including Keeler and Powell, a couple of chimpanzees, and couples of various ages and races, including non-stereotyped African American and Asian couples, and children. It’s another tableau that could only occur onscreen, never in a theatre. Somehow, dozens of roller skating women become involved, as does the young dwarf Billy Barty playing a slightly overgrown baby, who ends up curled underneath the legs of dozens of policemen who roller skate around his prone body, spreading their legs apart so they won’t hit him, a strange counterpoint to the end of the “Young and Healthy” segment in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. A bit later, Barty frolics in a snowstorm with dozens of women, and then suddenly is transported to a park in the spring where he is playing on the grass with a ball that rolls near a woman laying on the grass in a long white dress with her thighs almost fully exposed next to a man in a suit and straw hat. Around them are many couples dressed exactly the same. A downpour ensues, and the women change behind a back-lighted scrim; their back-lit silhouettes as they undress leave little to the imagination. Barty wants to raise the scrim while the women are naked, poised between their wet clothes and their dry clothes. At the end of the sequence the rain continues pouring upon the assembled couples, and Powell begins cutting Keeler out of an iron maiden bustier with a can opener as the audience bursts into applause.

Frank boundary-bending sexuality frequently existed in Berkeley’s work, but “Pettin’ In The Park” goes particularly far in this area; everyone is getting wet, so to speak. It would not have passed muster under the stricter 1934 PCA rules. Roy Hemming, in his history of movie musical songwriters, noted that the composition was “risqué and daring in its day, when public ‘petting’ was landing people in jail in some cities as part of the morals crusade sweeping the country.”<sup>25</sup> The whole sequence has little to do with the usual musical dance number – this is cheesecake titillation fantasy transformed onto celluloid. The skill exhibited in “Pettin’” does not emanate from the performers, it could be almost anyone acting out the parts in this surreal sequence

---

<sup>25</sup> Hemming, 260.



calculated to just barely pass the censors' pencil -- Berkeley's imagination is again the star of the show.

Subsequently, *Gold Diggers* follows a plotline concerning Powell's family, a Boston blueblood clan unhappy with his activity in the supposed impropriety of the musical theatre world. They threaten his inheritance unless he abandons his performing and songwriting, and are particularly unhappy that he wishes to marry the character played by Keeler. To his relatives, showgirls are "little parasites, gold diggers." Powell refuses to relent, so his brother and uncle go to the chorus girls' apartment to offer Keeler money to back off the marriage. But Powell's brother and the family lawyer uncle are taken in by Keeler's roommates and fellow actresses played by Joan Blondell, who is mistaken for Keeler by the two bluebloods, and Aline MacMahon. Together, affronted by the rich socialites' insulting of them and their profession, they seduce and trick the rich socialites into buying them expensive clothing and accessories. In a preposterous premise, Powell's brother believes he can make Blondell/Keeler transfer her affections from Powell to him, thereby breaking up the potential marriage. While Blondell and Keeler are not excited by the gifts that the bluebloods' money can buy, MacMahon's character is quite smitten, fulfilling the gold digger stereotype. Various games and charades ensue, and, rather unrealistically, the Blondell character and Powell's brother fall in love, despite their initial disrespect of each other. Blondell proves she is not a gold digger when she refuses a check for \$10,000 that the brother pays when tricked into thinking he has taken sexual advantage of her while drunk. An unseemly plot miraculously works out in the end -- everyone is happily married, and redeemed without rancor.

While some have condemned Warners' *Gold Diggers* films for their portrayal of women as money-grasping millionaire-chasers, the overall portrait in this film suggests a less mercenary interpretation. As film historian Molly Haskell remarked, such films marked "one of the few genres and occasions where there is a real feeling of solidarity among women. Although theoretically in competition, they also realise that the cards are stacked against them, that they have this in common, and that they stand a much greater chance of succeeding if they unite."<sup>26</sup> The solidarity they demonstrate in the opening scenes in their shared apartment, sharing what little food they have and the tips they hear of possible stage work, demonstrate this quality, as does the quick and witty intelligence of their dialogue and their ease and caring for each other. But such qualities unfortunately were not used to sell these films, and so are less remarked upon then and now.

Relief from the ridiculous blueblood scenario is finally provided by Berkeley. He takes one of Warren and Dubin's less appealing and more saccharine songs, "The Shadow Waltz," and transforms it into rapturous cinema. Women dressed in diaphanous white skirts with undulating hoops that seem to magically float on air play violins and dance on a cavernous set of 40-foot-tall art deco staircases with a reflecting pool. When the lighting is extinguished, the women's violins and bows are lit with neon, creating a singular ghostly image. Gimmick, yes, but a beautiful and dreamy gimmick, especially when medium close-ups reveal the chorus girls attractively bathed in chiaroscuro from the neon light of their violins. Berkeley's

---

<sup>26</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (University of Chicago Press, 1987): 145.

traditional overhead shots follow, showing the assembled women forming attractive flower shapes with their dresses. Berkeley once again redefines the visual and dance elements of the movie musical.

In the final moments of the film, with no warning or connection to the plot, the Great Depression returns. Hopkins' vision for a musical focusing on "the big parade of tears" is finally realised in the "Remember My Forgotten Man" sequence which opens with Blondell watching a man down on his luck pick up a cigarette butt off the street. He has no matches to relight the butt, so Blondell lights a new cigarette in her lips, and places it in his lips, demonstrating an affection towards him that the lyric implies society has not shown. Blondell starts singing as she leans plaintively against the same lamppost that the man was leaning on as the scene began, once again putting herself in his place. The lyrics are soon echoed, with New Orleans jazz-styled brass counterpoint, by the African American vocalist Ella Moten sitting in a window; one year later she became the first black artist to perform at the White House. Her appearance in *Gold Diggers* represents a rare non-stereotyped vision of an African American from a major studio during the decade, and led to the black press referring to her as "The New Negro Woman" in Hollywood films.<sup>27</sup> She is portrayed juxtaposed, as an equal, with other (non-black) despondent women waiting for their men, and she shares the lead vocal with Blondell. Her singing is sincere, not accompanied by the minstrel buffoonery often marring black performances in 1930s Hollywood studio films. She is dressed similarly to the other women in the scene. Berkeley's dance sequences from this period included surprisingly progressive portrayals of black Americans; the final scene in this "Forgotten Man" sequence features an African American man right next to Blondell, wearing the same kind of respectable suit and hat as the rest of the male chorus. The point appears to be made subtly that African Americans are citizens and war heroes, and that they too are suffering in the present period; their humanity is recognised, an unfortunately rare occurrence in Hollywood product during this period.

The next segment in the "Forgotten Man" sequence spotlights returning veterans in an intriguing way: it begins with soldiers parading in triumph to the beat of patriotic music after coming home from the war, pelted by ticker tape and kisses from strangers (as actually occurred after World War I). Following that, we see the struggles it took to get to that point in counter-chronological order, as they march in the rain, and then are seen bloody, blind and limping in the aftermath of a battle. The initial celebratory mood of soldiers returning to society has been altered, yet the patriotic marching music continues -- the effect is moving. Next, we see the men in Depression bread lines, looking cold, weary and lost, sharing cigarettes as they wait for food.

According to film writer Michael Freedland, Harry Warner worried that audiences would not want to see "dirty poor faces" when going out to the movies. The betrayal of these returning veterans served as the focus of the song's lyric: "Remember my

---

<sup>27</sup> John Troesser, "Ten Things You Should Know About Ella Moten Barnett," *Texas Escapes* [online magazine], <http://www.texasescapes.com/TexasPersonalities/Etta-Moten-Barnett-2>, accessed 22 February 2012. For more on the history of black performers on film, particularly musicians, see Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America* (Chicago, 2010): Chapter 3; Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film* (Oxford, 1993).

forgotten man, you put a rifle in his hand, you sent him far away, you shouted ‘hip-hooray!’, but look at him today.” Perhaps Harry Warner should have remembered that a few months before the release of *Gold Diggers*, Bing Crosby enjoyed the top-selling record in the country with Jay Gorney and Yip Harburg’s song “Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?,” which painted similar word pictures of veterans “slogging through hell,” and Americans who were “destitute and forgotten” during the Great Depression. Crosby biographer and jazz critic Gary Giddins referred to the composition as “the one Tin Pan Alley hit [during the period] that addressed the darkness in American life,” perhaps as unique as the “Forgotten Man” sequence was among American films when it came out. Crosby, the most popular vocalist in the nation, covered three of the Great Depression Musicals numbers and two of them topped the sales charts during 1933.<sup>28</sup>

The Al Jolson-starring hit musical *Hallelujah, I’m A Bum*, which reached theaters a month before *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, also referenced the current suffering in the United States, but in a whimsical rather than tragic way. The beautifully shot and bittersweet film follows the activities of a hobo and his compatriots living in New York City’s Central Park. Witty and conversational songs by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart forward the plot skillfully, and much of the dialogue is delivered in verse in a style that Shakespeare might have employed had he been alive during the 1930s. Like the Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals, the film’s characters share an ambivalent relationship with money and riches. “You got the grass, you got the trees,” declares one lyric. “What do you want with money?” As millions of Americans were themselves homeless and suffering, this film made such a lifestyle seem attractive and honorable, while still acknowledging the difficulties such a life entails. It’s a musical that deserves more notice; like the three 1933 Warners musicals that form the center of this book, its influence was unfortunately mostly ignored by the more fanciful movie musicals that later defined the genre. Some evidence indicates that, contrary to Harry Warner’s concerns, audiences appreciated seeing the difficult circumstances of their times envisaged on film. “Every patron [was] well-pleased,” according to a theatre owner in Oxford, NC. “The last scene, ‘The Forgotten Man’ scene, seemed to impress patrons more than the others.”<sup>29</sup>

In the final scene of the “Forgotten Man” sequence, Berkeley again uses silhouettes to dramatic effect, only this time they trace the figures of World War I soldiers, not nude chorus girls changing after a rainstorm. The soldiers are elevated to the top of a gigantic set in what probably was meant as purposeful symbolism, marching behind and over the massed vocalists and “forgotten men” in suits. A female chorus onstage, stretching their hands skyward as if they were in church, provide the “wailing” that Barney wished for when he first visualised this number. The music in this section contains more than a hint of Jewish cantorial minor-key singing, and the song as a whole may be Warren and Dubin’s most famous and emotionally moving composition. One wonders if it is significant that at the end of the number, the men and the women are separated, especially considering the solidarity between the sexes

---

<sup>28</sup> Gary Giddins, *Bing Crosby: A Pocketful of Dreams, The Early Years 1903-1940*: (Boston, 2001): 305, 308, 598-599.

<sup>29</sup> J. J. Medford in “What The Picture Did For Me” [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (21 October 1933).

that the sequence opened with. Could this have served as symbolism for the increased incidence of divorce and drop in child births that occurred during the Great Depression?

The “Forgotten Man” sequence was doubtless inspired by the Bonus Army episode that occurred scant months before the completion of the first draft of *Gold Diggers*.<sup>30</sup> Certain themes from *I Am a Fugitive From A Chain Gang* and *Heroes For Sale* were probably inspired by the Bonus Army as well. During the spring and summer of 1932, thousands (accounts claim anywhere from 11,000-25,000) of unemployed World War I vets travelled to Washington, D.C., resided in a makeshift camp near the Anacostia River, squatted in unused government buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue (the same street the White House resides on), and demanded early instatement of the bonus due them from the federal government in 1945. The signs they carried and slogans they recited could have been incorporated into the “Forgotten Man” sequence, such as: “Cheered in ’17, Jeered in ’32.”

Sadly, the government generally ignored them, and worse. The Senate refused to pass a bill allowing early bonus disbursement, and many of the disgusted veterans decided to stay on. On 28 July, President Herbert Hoover, then engaged in a tough presidential election race with Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a White House surrounded by chains and cleared of nearby pedestrians because of a fear of the protesters, issued orders for the U.S. Army to evict the so-called Bonus Army. Led by future World War II General Douglas MacArthur, “four troops of cavalry with drawn sabers, six tanks and a column of steel-helmeted infantry with fixed bayonets entered downtown Washington,” according to historian William E. Leuchtenberg. “After clearing the buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue, they crossed the Anacostia Bridge, thousands of veterans and their wives and children fleeing before them, routed the veterans from their crude homes, hurling tear gas bombs into the colony, and set the shacks afire with their torches.” In addition, the District of Columbia police shot and killed two veterans squatting in government buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue. Hoover had not ordered such an excess of confrontation, particularly the tear gas attacks and fatal shootings, but nonetheless he refused to condemn his general and the local police force afterward, making it appear that he condoned the incident. This fuelled the impression of Hoover as callous and out of touch with the suffering of the nation, and likely pulled even more supporters away from his flagging presidential re-election campaign.

---

<sup>30</sup> This account of the 1932 Bonus Army is based on the following sources: Frank Friedel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York, 1990): 75; David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford, 1999): 92-93, 138; William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York, 1963): 13-16; Kyle D. Palmer, “Campaign Issues Are Ignored by Roosevelt; Large Crowds Hear Candidate’s Appeal but Learn Little of Where He Stands,” *Los Angeles Times* (25 September 1932); *Gold Diggers of 1933: FDR’s New Deal Broadway Bound*.

In one of his actions during his first month in office, Roosevelt actually cut the pay of veterans by almost 50% as an austerity measure, at a time when veteran benefits comprised about a quarter of the entire federal budget. The March 1933 bill similarly slashed the salaries of all government and military personnel, including Congressmen -- see Kennedy, 138. In 1936, Congress finally passed a “bonus bill, awarding the World War I vets their bonuses nine years early” -- over Roosevelt’s veto -- see Kennedy, 279. Despite benefiting politically from Hoover’s mishandling of the Bonus Army, Roosevelt also never capitulated on early bonuses for them as part of his New Deal.

In addition to leading attacks against American war veterans, the Hoover Administration weakened its image further by “vilifying the Bonus Army as a rabble of communists and criminals,” in Leuchtenberg’s words. MacArthur publicly referred to the marchers as “a mob...animated by the essence of revolution.” Such accusations were laughable, belied by public statements and goals issued by the veterans. The men, patriots not traitors, were poverty-stricken and under-appreciated -- there existed little if any talk about overthrowing the government. But such loose talk by government figures fell comfortably within a growing tradition of Communist baiting that had escalated since the rise of Soviet Russia and the Red Scare in Washington D.C. during the 1917-1920 period. Even though the American Communist party grew by meagre numbers during the severe economic dislocation of the 1930s, events occurring during the filming of *Footlight Parade* during the summer and fall of 1933 would mark the first appearance of a drive against perceived Communist leanings in the film business by Congress and film industry executives.

The phrase “forgotten man” apparently originated from a Roosevelt 1932 campaign radio speech that stressed a connection between WWI vets and the Depression, mentioning “the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.” When Roosevelt was in Los Angeles for the September 1932 motion picture industry-sponsored pageant, he proclaimed in one of his speeches that his administration would be interested in the “forgotten people” of the United States. The reprise of the Bonus Army sentiment in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, particularly as part of a stirring and patriotic conclusion to the film, represented another important onscreen indication of the pro-Roosevelt bias of the Warner brothers in early 1933, just as the Administration took office. These various associations help explain why “Remember My Forgotten Man” proved controversial in some circles. “A few years later, the song still being popular, the censors refused to allow the song to be performed via the airwaves, contending that the lyrics were not in the best interests of the country’s morale and were ‘subversive,’” according to Patricia Dubin McGuire, Al Dubin’s daughter. “Al loved that; he took it as a real compliment and it promptly became one of his favourite lyrics.”

The marketing for *Gold Diggers* surpassed the campaign for *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, representing a new, more aggressive promotional strategy for Warner Bros.<sup>31</sup> No individual film during 1933 was the subject of more full-page and multi-page ads in *Motion Picture Herald*, including three full pages of ads devoted to the film during its premiere week. One of those ads spotlighted the pressbook for the film, something no other studio emphasized in their film marketing. Eight lifesize standees of characters were available to exhibitors for \$5.95 apiece. The studio provided drama scripts based on the film for radio stations. Cartoon shorts were commissioned by Warners and released for three of the film’s songs, including “We’re In the Money,” which in the

<sup>31</sup> Sources concerning the marketing of *Gold Diggers of 1933*: *Gold Diggers of 1933* serialization, in *Gold Diggers of 1933* Publicity – Clips file (681); *Gold Diggers of 1933* Publicity – Pressbook, file (681); WBA/USC. “Asides and Interludes” [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (27 May 1933).

“We’re In The Money,” “Petting in the Park,” and “Torch Song” cartoons featured on *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Warner Bros. DVD, 2006)

decades that followed became a staple of the studio's cartoon soundtracks, particularly those starring Bugs Bunny. No doubt this ubiquity was at least partly due to the song being owned by Warner Bros. music publishing arm. The official pressbook and ads in motion picture trade magazines featured advertising for the film's sheet music (the same would be true a few months later for *Footlight Parade*). A Dick Powell dress shirt was made and promoted in tandem with the film, and displayed in "over 12,000 stores" nationwide. The studio even tried to negotiate a deal with Roosevelt's Treasury Secretary to borrow a collection of rare "gold coins of all denominations" from the government for display in the New York theatre that premiered the film. In informing exhibitors how to sell *Gold Diggers*, the film's pressbook instructed them to emphasize its identity as a Warner Bros. film, and that it is not one of the many imitations in production around Hollywood, but a film made by the same creative team that did *42<sup>nd</sup>*. "It's bigger and better," brags the copy. "...The show backs you up in this absolutely." For newspapers too strapped to send a reviewer, Warners provided ready-made reviews, including one that immodestly referred to the film as the "Super Spectacle of All Time."

Sexier elements of the film were stressed in the marketing. The studio made available to newspapers a 10-part serialization of the film, the titles emphasizing the more prurient moments: "All Show Girls Are Gold Diggers," "Sleeping in Strange Beds." One of the prepared stories for newspapers available in the film's pressbook reported how "Diners at the Warner Bros. studio café in North Hollywood got the shock of their lives when 200 pretty gold digger chorus girls romped in for lunch clad in next to nothing during the production." The theme continued in photos and drawings promoting the film, most of which featured women from the film with little clothing, and many of which features tableaux not included in the film. One picture of actress Muriel Gordon depicts her nude with a sheer cloth held to her middle. Another features a trio of women holding hoops with cloth which barely covers their nipples and displays some of their breasts. Perhaps the most famous of these images features Joan Blondell stuffing money into her panty hose at mid-thigh. The caption reads "Blondell uses her own First National bank in *Gold Diggers of 1933*," even though her character in the film is never shown doing this, fights being defined as a gold digger, and ultimately refuses to cash a \$10,000 check offered by a rich suitor. Such prurient marketing was forbidden by the Advertising Code, an adjunct policy of the Production Code, "that mandated decent copy and demure illustrations," according to film historian Thomas Doherty. Yet the studios knew from years of experience that the "sex angle" illustrated baldly "led audiences in a straight line to the box office."<sup>32</sup> In 1933, the Advertising Code had as much power of enforcement as the Production Code and was routinely ignored.

Simultaneously, the publicity materials attempted to build an entirely different image for the ingénue film star Ruby Keeler. The prepared stories concerning her feature the headlines "Keeler Just an Old Fashioned Sweet Girl: She's the Type Old Timers Love to Refer to When Lamenting Scarcity of 'Gals of Mother's Time'" and "Keeler, Millionairess, Is as Timid as an Extra," with a subhead of "Unusually Modest." Such themes coalesced with the personalities of the characters Keeler tended to portray.

---

<sup>32</sup> Doherty, 107-113. For more information concerning the 1933 introduction of the Advertising Code, see: [uncited author], "Hays' 12 Commandments to P.A.'s Just About Takes in Everything," *Variety* (26 December 1933).

While the showgirls that Keeler's character lives with tend to harbour a realistic attitude towards romance during the Great Depression, placing their emphasis on finding a provider for a mate, Keeler plays a dreamer who still believes true love will lead her to where she will be happiest. One can sense the Warner marketing team trying to reach for as many audiences as possible, the ones who wanted to view some flesh and the more traditional family-minded demographic. Tellingly, the promotional materials almost completely ignore the segments in the film focusing on the Great Depression. Perhaps such themes did not represent the mood of escapism that the PR department thought would sell best. In the initial 1933 trio of Great Depression Musicals, the showgirls are not so much mercenary as realistic as they try to survive within a harsh environment, and for most of them, love and career trump money as their priorities – starting in 1934, the girls in the Warner musicals become more money-obsessed and calculating, one of many reasons the films don't work nearly as well, and perhaps a reason why the box office returns dwindled.

The reviews for *Gold Diggers* in the New York, Los Angeles and Denver papers (where the film was previewed) were uniformly positive, usually more positive for Berkeley than the film as a whole.<sup>33</sup> The reviews were often so good that they often sounded like publicity, but they did not quote the ghosted stories Warners provided. *Variety* declared it "superior" to *42nd*. In Los Angeles, at the film's premiere at Grauman's Chinese theatre, the studio arranged a parade down Hollywood Boulevard, set up a live radio broadcast that announced the arrival of various Hollywood stars (including Joan Crawford, Clark Gable and the Marx Brothers), and funded an elaborate series of five "prologues" before the main feature began featuring a cast of 100 choreographed by Larry Ceballos, a Warner employee who went on to design one of the major dance sequences in *Footlight Parade*. Prologues were short live theatre pieces, usually of a musical or comedy variety, staged before films at the more prestigious first-run theaters in major cities; in the age of sound films they were fading away, but they serve as a major plot point in *Footlight Parade*. While Warner publicity mostly ignored the Depression-related themes featured in *Gold Diggers*, critics did not. Denver reviewers called "Forgotten Man" "as moving a song as I can remember" and "the most timely, strong heart-appealing song we have ever heard." New York papers tended to ignore the first and last musical numbers of the film, which registered the Great Depression most strongly, and one New York critic took the filmmakers to task on this issue. Lucius Beebe, the famed author and journalist, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, viewed the film as

---

<sup>33</sup> Reviews referenced in chronological, then alphabetical order: [uncited author], "Orpheum, Aladdin Get 'Gold Diggers of 33'," *Denver Post* (23 May 1933); Betty Craig, "'Gold Diggers Is Lavish Picture of Theater Life,'" *Denver Post* (27 May 1933); Alberta Pike, "'Gold Diggers' Put Reviewer In Raving Mood," *Rocky Mountain News* [Denver] (27 May 1933); "Premiere Attracts Notables," *Los Angeles Times* (1 June 1933); "'Gold Diggers' Premiere Will Be Gala Event," *Los Angeles Times* (2 June 1933); Eleanor Barnes, "'Gold Diggers' Glamorous At Grauman's Chinese: Prologue? Silly Question!" *Daily News* [Los Angeles] (3 June 1933); Relman Morin, "'Gold-Diggers,' Dazzling Musical, Opens at Chinese," *Los Angeles Record's Cinematters Section* (3 June 1933); Edwin Schallert, "'Gold Diggers of 1933' Arrives With Elaborate Premiere Fanfare at Grauman's Chinese," *Los Angeles Times* (3 June 1933); Lucius Beebe, "On The Screen [column]," *NY Herald-Trib* (8 June 1933). These reviews, and numerous others, particularly from New York papers (except for most of the articles from the *Los Angeles Times*), are found in the *Gold Diggers of 1933* Publicity – Clips file (681), WBA/USC. Also: *Gold Diggers of 1933* review article from *Variety*, *ibid*.

a combination of very satisfactory film revue and as annoying an essay in national legislative propaganda as may well be imagined. As entertainment, up to the last fifteen minutes of the film, the pieces [sic] is an adroit, amusing well filmed and at time hilarious screen farce, after which it descends to depths of bathetic sentimentality which, for sheer and gratuitous offensive, would be hard to rival... [the Forgotten Man sequence], apparently inserted in the script of the film as an afterthought, tends to diminish in a very emphatic manner its effectiveness and its qualities as entertainment... 'Gold Diggers of 1933' is a film strictly on the gold standard. It is only a pity that its producers had to diminish its effectiveness by the introduction of a shabby theme of bogus sentimentality in general favoring a legislative action [the early payment of veterans' bonuses] which should be no concern of a photoplay designed primarily as amusement fare.

Beebe correctly noted that the "Forgotten Man" sequence essentially represented "an afterthought." No mention of it exists in surviving scripts, and according to the daily progress reports for the production, the sequence was filmed last, from roughly 7-13 April 1933.<sup>34</sup> It is testament to the speed and efficiency of the Hollywood system that the completed film previewed in Denver on 26 May 1933, roughly six weeks later. It is almost impossible to imagine a film today taking as little time from the cessation of filming to release. This situation occurred because the Hollywood studios not only consolidated and vertically integrated production, distribution and exhibition, but also because they employed the experts and technicians year-round needed to complete a film. The much more atomised studios of today can't afford to retain thousands of people full-time on the payroll; each film's crew is usually assembled for that film and that film alone, a far less efficient system. The studio employees of the golden age were used to working together, and the force of their actions were carefully organised by studio management. If Warners wanted a film like *Gold Diggers* rush-released, they possessed the manpower and expertise to make it happen.

Other critics and certainly audiences did not share in Beebe's critique; the film, which premiered 27 May 1933, became a huge box office success, with initial returns easily surpassing those of *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*.<sup>35</sup> First week receipts for *Gold Diggers* were 42% higher than for *42<sup>nd</sup>* in New York and Denver, 48% higher in San Antonio, and

<sup>34</sup> *Gold Diggers of 1933* Story Production – Daily Progress Reports file (1448), Warner Bros. Archive, University of Southern California.

<sup>35</sup> See multi-page ads for *Gold Diggers of 1933* in *Motion Picture Herald* (10, 17 and 24 June 1933); "The Box Office Champions For June" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (22 July 1933); "Box Office Champions For July" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (19 August 1933); "The Box Office Champions For August" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (16 September 1933); "The Box Office Champions of 1932-33" [column], *Motion Picture Herald* (21 October 1933). "What The Picture Did For Me" [columns], *Motion Picture Herald* (1 July, 5 August, 2 September, 7 October, 4 November 1933). See also *Motion Picture Herald*'s "Theatre Receipts" columns for July, August and September.

In this period, films didn't roll out nationally on hundreds or thousands of screens on the same day as happens today in the United States. A release of even a major film such as *Gold Diggers* often took months to work its way around the country. This is why there are only box office reports listed from selected cities concerning the opening weeks of the film's release.

Financial information on Warner Bros.: [uncited authors], "Warners Now On Profitable Basis; '32-'33 Losses Reduced Eight Millions," and "Highlights of Warner Finances," *Motion Picture Herald* (18 November 1933); "Warner Profit For Quarter \$100,000," *Motion Picture Herald* (16 December 1933).



anywhere from 16-32% higher in Charlotte, Cleveland and Memphis, despite a national heat wave. Like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, it was the top grossing film in its first full month of release (June), but unlike its antecedent, also held that title for the month following, and was the third-highest grossing film in August. By late August, three months after its original release, *Gold Diggers* had surpassed the runs for *42<sup>nd</sup>* in major cities, running for 11 weeks at Grauman's Chinese theatre in Hollywood, 9 weeks in New York City, 6 weeks in Portland, OR, 5 weeks in Seattle and 6 weeks and 4 weeks at two different theaters in Chicago. The engagements for other films of the period did not last anywhere close to as long or profitably in theatres. One example of the competition, the Universal Studios musical *Be Mine Tonight*, played for 17 weeks in Los Angeles, but averaged \$1,000-2000 per week, a far cry from the roughly \$18,000 weekly that *Gold Diggers* pulled in at the Chinese during its 11 week-run. Once again, theatre owners mostly raved about the business the film did: "For the first time in five years, my house [theatre] was not large enough" (Montpelier, ID); "we enjoyed the best business in the past five years" (Oxford, NC); "Biggest business in two years and the picture pleased" (Frankfort, KS); "it drew for 30 miles in every direction and we had more paid admissions on this than on any one show in the history of this theatre, which runs ten years back" (Selma, LA). *Gold Diggers* earned more for Warners than *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*; in *Motion Picture Herald's* chart of the top movie earners from October 1932-September 1933, it ranked as the top draw of the season, with *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* in third place. The two films together doubtless evinced an impact on the good financial news at the end of August when Warners' fiscal year ended. The studio had lost \$6.29 million for that past year, less than half of their loss for the year previous, and September and October 1933 saw the company earn its first "small net profit" in three years.

*Gold Diggers of 1933* also became immediately influential in the industry, as especially witnessed in MGM's *Dancing Lady*, released in November 1933, which features various Berkeley-like devices and images, such as chorus girls revolving upon lazy susans, unorthodox camera angles including from directly above the performers, silhouettes of nude women behind scrims, and close-ups of its chorus girls. Though it is a quite entertaining film that stands on its own, particularly because of winning performances by Joan Crawford and Clark Gable, this backstage musical is the kind of imitative film that Albert Warner was complaining about when the Warner Great Depression Musicals became immensely popular. It's a better looking, more technically accomplished film than its Warner Bros. competition (MGM films almost always were), but it contains little of the spirit of innovation seen in the Warner films, none of the grime and desperation that marks those films as singular within their genre. While the dance sequences feature many imaginative shots, and better hoofing from Crawford than one sees from Keeler, they don't boast the sustained level of abandon and imagination in Berkeley's work.

With the "Forgotten Man" segment over, *Gold Diggers of 1933* abruptly concludes, and one can feel its divided nature – about a third of it represents the most poignant portrayal of the economic dislocation of the period in musical form up to that time, and another third is comprised of a clichéd and dubious rags-to-riches plot and dialogue. One can almost feel the two disparate parts grafted together Frankenstein-

style by the studio's writers and producers in the wake of the success of *42<sup>nd</sup>* and the election of President Franklin Roosevelt, the man who vowed to directly confront the problems of the desperately poor in the United States, as his predecessor, Herbert Hoover, mostly refused to do. One of the many reasons *Footlight Parade* proves the best of the Warner Bros.' Great Depression Musicals is that it keeps the theme of struggle against calamity at the center of its existence -- its themes are uniform, they build and carry within the film, which renders it more convincing. *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *Gold Diggers* pointed the way, but, as my future research will demonstrate, their successor *Footlight Parade* carried the idea of the series to its perfection.